

*Youth are Cooking Up Fun!*

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Most food and nutrition experiences for youth emphasize nutrition knowledge and awareness of healthy eating practices, rather than independent food skills such as food selection, handling, and preparation. Youth who do not have independent food skills often grow into adulthood lacking the skills needed to provide healthy low cost meals for their families. In addition, few nutrition programs engage youth in planning the learning experience and evaluating their skill mastery. Empowering youth with food skills in the context of positive youth development will contribute to the capacity of low-income families to improve their diets, health, and quality of life. *Cooking Up Fun!* provides youth ages 9 to 12 the opportunity to gain independent food skills. The teaching, training, and evaluation tools integrate the educational goals of promoting healthy food practices and positive youth development. FSNE paraprofessionals work with small groups of youth, allowing each participant to create his/her own workstation to prepare recipes. They facilitate the learning experience by engaging youth in planning the cooking sessions; creating conversation about food and the cooking process; and providing the time, space, and encouragement to master food skills. The *Cooking Up Fun!* teaching guides provide tools for adults to plan, facilitate, and evaluate a series of cooking sessions using youth-tested recipes that are low cost, are based on the principles of the Dietary Guidelines and Food Guide Pyramid and reflect cultural diversity. Adults engage youth in planning the sessions by identifying their interests and needs and offering recipe choices. The recipe-based program includes additional experiential activities related to reading recipes, food and kitchen safety, ingredient science, and making healthy food choices. Data from the *Cooking Up Fun!* evaluation project indicates that low-income youth who participated in 4 to 6 sessions of *Cooking Up Fun!* gained confidence and mastery of food skills. Comments collected from these youth indicated that the sessions were fun and meaningful. The "About Today's Session" form was completed at each session by each youth participant to assess her/his cooking experience. A total of 550 forms were completed, across all sites, all youth, and all sessions. Of the total self-assessments: 75% rated the session *Great*; 71% learned a new cooking skill; 70% improved a cooking skill; 68% intended to make the recipe again; 63% had not made the recipe before the session; 62% could teach a friend to make the recipe. *Cooking Up Fun!* is funded by the New York State 4-H Foundation, Cornell Cooperative Extension, and the Division of Nutritional Sciences, Cornell University. Food Stamp Nutrition Education staff have used *Cooking Up Fun!* successfully in after school programs that serve youth from families who are Food Stamp Program recipients.